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Edinburgh Waterfront Design Defining a Destination Charette

Charrette Report
Neil Mulholland

“What is happening now is that the City of Edinburgh is finding an edge right up against the waterfront. It will be like skin on custard when it crumples up against the edge and goes dense. It will become a very different kind of place from the sprawl that happens around the rest of our suburbs. It is how that happens which is going to be of such great importance.” Introduction – Trevor Davis, Convenor of Planning for The City of Edinburgh Council

Edinburgh's waterfront development is *the* major regeneration site in the UK. It represents a significant opportunity for Edinburgh to expand as a city and to find the space it needs to accommodate its ever-growing population. The development will mark a new phase in Edinburgh's history, the creation of another new town, one that comes with the pressure of living up to the standards set by the much celebrated large scale masterplanning exercise by James Craig (1767), and the less fêted new districts of the 1945-75 redevelopment era which constitute part of the development sites in Granton and Leith Docks.

How do planners and architects compete with a world heritage centre? How do you deliver the quality and sense of place that we find in central Edinburgh? How do you ensure that this new part of Edinburgh becomes as iconic as the older heart of the city? This is no easy task, and it is one compounded by the fact that public planning and development now has to contend with the private construction sector's desire to maximise profits. How do planners ensure that the new Edinburgh waterfront is “not just for tourists [that] it's for the people who live there as well as visit?” (Introduction – Trevor Davis.)

The charrette's proceedings led to a great deal of discussion of icons and their function as a means of creating quality and identity within the fabric of the city. Clearly Edinburgh is chock full of icons big and small - from the Castle to Grayfriar's Bobby – do we really need another? Most of these icons belong to a time when it was still possible to impose a sense of 'agreement' on the public regarding what was deemed to be politically, culturally and historically important. This imperialist sense of civic duty and of place has gone, something to be celebrated as much as it might be decried.

The post-war national reconstruction drive created developments that opted for something less regimented and less classical in their approach. There are no clear centres or icons in Edinburgh's most daring modernist built environments but there was still something lacking at the charrette - a consensual confidence in progress and rationality in building led by public sector finance. Without this, it is unlikely that the waterfront will be a coherent architectural statement. Perhaps it is just as well. The model for the new areas is closely mapped onto the idea that Edinburgh is, at heart, a city of villages. There are 38 conservation areas in Edinburgh, each with its own unique character and appearance. Many of these areas are characterised by their origins in scattered houses, open fields, ribbon development and a lack of overall planning philosophy. Landowners were numerous, pursuing developments in an unrelated fashion, creating areas wherein we find rich mixtures of historical periods and stages of development.

“Little test: four cities in four continents. I’ve not come across someone who can actually name the continents let alone the cities. Four settlements in two continents? Everybody can tell me where they are. There is something we are doing that is wrong, and it’s not rocket science. We do not need some elaborate machine or mechanism to actually get to the point that we should be place-making.” Riccardo Marini – City Design Leader – The City of Edinburgh Council.

As Marini points out, the unification of many planning schemes today could in fact be their downfall. Unification leads to homogenisation. Marini, in contrast, wants to stress Edinburgh’s ‘vernacular mobilisation’, the global desire to create convincing differentiated cultural bases. “It’s about the spaces between the buildings that the masterplan can affect most.” John Deffenbaugh, Planning Officer, Architecture & Design, The City of Edinburgh Council. This much is true, but there are other ways in which the masterplanning process is seeking to allow more creative leverage over the commercial value of the land.

It is no accident that the question of icons and the roles that artists and designers play in creating them should have been so central to the Charrette. Marini summed this up with great effect: “Design adds value. This is one of the standard values we have when we talk about quality and design. This is a load of nonsense. Design *is* value. Without design you do not have any value.” Indeed, art and design are ways of creating value from what appears to be nothing (but is in fact composed of labour and ideas). Raw real estate has no value unless it is designed and subsequently transformed. Cultural capital begets financial capital – the difficulty here is in persuading those who only understand the language of hard cash to comprehend this simple fact. So creating a sense of iconicity is perhaps an unavoidable corollary of designing *anything*. But what sort of icon do we want? Will we get what we want or just the kind of icon that we *deserve*?

As Trevor Davis suggested at the very beginning of the charrette, the waterfront could provide an icon of a different sort. It forms a part of the city that isn’t known to most of its inhabitants, many who tend to think of it as land-locked. As a spectacle it will mainly be visible from Fife or from crossing the Firth of Forth on the new ferry (fingers crossed). The masterplan already proposes that a long boardwalk – Edinburgh has a waterfront of more than 10 miles as a whole - could be the icon which connects the disparate areas (which have very different identities and histories that must be respected) that come under the regeneration plan. This will form a narrative thread to allow residents and visitors to traverse the newly accessible waterfront while moving through the different areas.

This represents a shift from the vertical imposing monuments of the past to something that functions as a plateau, a feature that spreads across the terrain and refuses to be consumed in one go. It also intimates something that could be transient, that could change to accommodate the different communities that come to inhabit the area over time. It clearly requires the input of artists and the local community if it is to be a successful project.

“It’s clear that there are different perspectives between the landowners, the developers, architects, councils, communities, and inhabitants, they have their own views based on their own needs but rarely have the opportunity to share these or choose to experience or understand each others perspectives.” KOAN 3 – Lorraine Aaron and Callum Sinclair.

Drawing on the ideas of the Situationist International, Aaron and Sinclair used their presentation to propose the investigation of architecture as “a flickering display of interacting desires and social infrastructures devoted to a nomadic life of creative play.” What would it mean to plan for provisionality? Can the waterfront development break with the planning ideas set forth in the New Town and the post-war schemes (enlightenment, rationalism, hierarchy and order) to allow for contingency and change?

Aaron and Sinclair clearly demonstrated that artists do not simply make objects to brighten up new cul-de-sacs. The world view of the artist as a fabricator of objects that are iconic (destinations) belongs to the 19th century. Today's professional artists are fully aware of the sort of economic and cultural role they play in the creation of 'destinations'; they provide 'cultural services', and are often now regarded as being part of the service sector in general. Of course some artists are more compliant with this bland description of what they do than others. If it is to be a success, Edinburgh's waterfront should follow the advice of Aaron and Sinclair and avoid collaboration exclusively with artists who wholeheartedly agree with what the redevelopment project stands for. Artists have to be allowed to be antagonistic and nomadic, to occupy space ambiently and reticently if their work is to add any meaning or value to a place. This has to be acknowledged in the design of the waterfront city – it is an unprecedented opportunity to do something truly innovative.

To this end, there is certainly a great deal of enlightened thinking going on already it would seem. Marini offers an olive branch: “What we are here to do is to be very focused in the notion of a strategic approach that embeds art as a way of thinking and doing things. We can create environments that enable artists to deliver work that reinforces the notion of place.” Riccardo Marini.

So what is stopping artists getting involved in the process of ensuring that the masterplan can incorporate something fluid and open? The prospect requires that the planning process incorporate a sustainable support mechanism for such work. There needs to a commitment to phases of temporary public art interventions along the boardwalk. This requires investment (eg. create a percent for art scheme, invest the proceeds - index linked to local house prices - in a trust and commissioning body that can administer the project over many years). This will need a degree of planning that connects the project with the Edinburgh Arts Festival and Scotland's internationally renowned community of public and site-orientated artists.¹

It is imperative that artists are employed in masterplanning processes so that they can provide input as designers of a different persuasion. It's also crucial that the planners are aware of international developments in contemporary public art. 2007 sees the opening of Munster Sculpture Project in Germany, a festival of public art that only comes around every ten years. This acts as a barometer for councils around the world who want to keep up with the present. Edinburgh Council must send representation to Munster. Edinburgh's record in this respect is very poor. Its commissioning of public art of late is laughable. It's simply not acceptable for a capital city to lag behind in this way if it wants to be taken seriously on the global stage.² The new waterfront is a great chance to make amends in this respect and to get things right.

¹ such as Toby Paterson, David Shrigley, Peter McCaughey, Douglas Gordon, Jacqueline Donachie, David Harding...

² The waterfront development can help to spearhead a cultural revival in so far as it could explore Edinburgh's (and Scotland's) independent links and networks with the world beyond the British Commonwealth, moving away from an outdated Great (North) Britishness that is

Of course, building the identity of the areas is a question of looking at what's already there that can be built on (e.g. Granton's Lighthouse) and thinking about what can be most imaginatively *recycled*.

In Edinburgh, artists have, since the second world war, taken responsibility for the support of contemporary art practices by renting and refurbishing unfashionable and post-industrial environments. Through establishing a model that is systematically social, grass roots tendencies have developed cultural sites that are self-regulating and relatively sovereign, generating economies that are ingrained in the local community. The development process is a great opportunity to ensure that some venues are retained that are less formal, since these help to advance an intellectual curiosity that is harder to achieve in spaces and organisations with sanctioned roles and responsibilities.

The waterfront could provide artists with such property without the need to develop a purpose built arts space. The waterfront development of Dundee Contemporary Arts being a possible exception, during the 1990s such purpose-built spaces have been largely disastrous. They are bigger than the demand and too expensive to run.³ They suck dry any funds that might allow smaller things to happen elsewhere. So there is little reason for artists to advocate a purpose-built centre in Edinburgh as a new icon for the Waterfront: it already has more than its fair share of large art venues of this sort. Perhaps having something that is more open and flexible, run by artists themselves, would be useful? Hopefully, with artists involved in the process, the masterplans will create spatial opportunities for artists to permanently colonise rather than for them to add value until such time as their accommodation has increased in value.⁴

Edinburgh can learn from the mistakes made elsewhere in the city and around Scotland and the rest of the (gentrified) world and ensure that artists have access to cheap property in a sustainable way. This, rather than the selling of Edinburgh's waterfront as an undifferentiated *mockdock* in a packed global market of gentrified urban centres, is one way in which it might realistically win 'world city' status. The success of the festivals certainly seems to have lifted Edinburgh's reputation so far. A

celebrated by so many of its statues. Since the Festival was launched in 1947, Edinburgh has been renegotiating its relations with the world in the manner of a city state. This desire is also at the heart of Richard Demarco's links with Europe, which are very well documented. The festival and Demarco's many projects are significant in their emphasis on transient approaches to space and a resistance to its colonisation.

³ Since they require national and lottery funding, such centres raise issues of a centralised monoculture replacing diversity and polymathic approach to arts and their infrastructures. Funding absorbed by large organisation with fewer (or indeed no) links to the artistic infrastructure of Edinburgh does not help the cultural health of the city. Growth has to be facilitated by café-bar and other commercial activities. If the size of the institution is far greater than the demand the spaces tend to close – growth is not a sustainable or relevant principle in contemporary art. What is needed is something smaller and unimproved by development – let the artists make their own adjustments and recycle some of the more interesting spaces that are protected by listing.

⁴ At the moment, the end of arm's length principles with the closure of the Scottish Arts Council is risking the ability of artists to create their own mythologies – it will put back the clock to before 1967 and take the localised elements out of Scottish art. The regeneration of so-called art districts in Glasgow simultaneously risks imploding the very basis of the art community (namely cheap property).

little more effort during the other eleven months of the year would go a long way to creating a new destination. Let's hope this helps to make Edinburgh's waterfront 'a very different kind of place'.

Neil Mulholland is a critic, curator and Director of the Centre for Visual and Cultural Studies, Edinburgh College of Art